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ITALY

The Pope Plot Goes to Trial

For more than four years the Turk who tried to kill Pope John Paul II has been polishing his story, adding and changing the details. Starting this week the adventures of Mehmet Ali Agca will unfold in an Italian court. The occasion is the trial of three Bulgarians and four Turks accused of helping Agca in a plot allegedly hatched by the Bulgarian government—and by implication the Soviet KGB. Inevitably, the Italian press has dubbed it “the trial of the century.” Judging by the passions and political tensions the case is sure to arouse, the spectacle in the courtroom of Judge Severino Santiapichi may almost justify the cliché.

The best weapon for the defense may be Agca himself. Last February, when the Turkish terrorist appeared in a televised interview, most viewers were turned off by his feverish, compulsive style. Last week prosecutors openly worried about how well Agca would hold up under cross-examination. “He may have some surprises for us,” said chief prosecutor Antonio Marini. “I

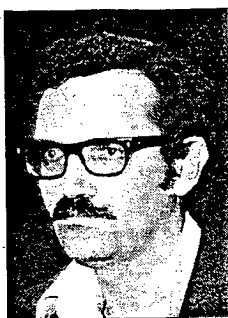
hope they’ll be positive ones.” NEWSWEEK has learned that defense lawyers plan to attack Agca’s credibility by suggesting he was coached by investigators for the prosecution to recognize the pictures of the three accused Bulgarians in a loose-leaf binder containing photos of 56 men. The defense will certainly make much of the fact that Agca claimed to have recognized a mug shot of Ivan Dontchev, chief of a Bulgarian spy ring in Italy. In fact, Agca later admitted, he had never even met Dontchev. Unless new evidence is revealed at the trial, a weak performance by Agca could leave the pros-

ecution with a largely circumstantial case.

Perhaps the most important defendant is Sergei Ivanov Antonov, a former Bulgarian airline representative who was charged last year with waiting in a car outside St. Peter’s Square in Rome to help Agca escape after the shooting. Two other Bulgarians, both former employees of the embassy in Rome, will be tried in absentia, as will at least one Turk, Bekir Celenk, who is still in Bulgaria. Two Turkish defendants have already admitted having helped Agca; they remain in Italian custody. The trial will take place in the converted, bunkerlike gym-

nasium—equipped with steel cages for the defendants, bullet-proof glass and watchtowers—where the terrorists convicted of killing Italy’s former Prime Minister Aldo Moro received their life sentences.

Defamation? While the jury was being selected last week, the defense was waging a vigorous battle in the press. Christian Roulette, a French author, and Roberto Napoleone, his Italian publisher, held a news conference to publicize the



Antonov: A key role?

Italian edition of a 290-page book claiming that Agca was working exclusively for a right-wing terrorist organization, the Gray Wolves. The book was particularly critical of Claire Sterling, the American journalist who popularized the notion of a Bulgarian plot. Sterling announced she was suing Roulette and Napoleone for defamation of character.

The Soviets probably will attempt to discredit the trial as well. Last March they trotted out Oleg Bitov, a newspaper editor who returned to Moscow last year after having defected to Britain. Bitov claimed

that he had been kidnapped by Western agents who attempted to make him testify against Antonov at the trial. He called the entire affair “a villainous provocation organized by the CIA.” But as the prosecution and defense spin out their cases, it may just become possible to determine who really organized the plot to kill the pope.

HARRY ANDERSON with THEODORE STANGER
in Rome